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Young children's perspectives on resolving social exclusion within inclusive classrooms



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ABSTRACT

Not all children benefit from the opportunities of inclusive education, especially children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). This article presents the findings of a Q study exploring the perspectives of children with or at risk of SEBD, who experience difficulties with their social participation within the mainstream classroom. Forty-five children, aged 6–8 years, sorted 15 statements outlining approaches for resolving social exclusion and victimisation situations. Four shared perspectives were identified per situation using by-person factor analysis. These perspectives differed primarily with respect to the actors held responsible for resolving the situation. Therefore, a one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate for addressing the social needs of children with or at risk of SEBD within the inclusive classroom.

1. Introduction

It is known that children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) are at risk to experience difficulties with their social participation within the (inclusive) classroom (Adderley et al., 2015; Henke et al., 2017). The majority of these children are less accepted by their peers (Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009) and face a greater degree of rejection than children without SEBD in their attempts to interact with the latter (Ladd, Ladd, Visconti, & Ettekal, 2012; Ruijs, Peetsma, & van der Veen, 2010). The difficulties and problems that children with SEBD face are related to manifestations of unsuccessful attempts at social participation within the mainstream education setting (Ladd et al., 2012; Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993). A typical characteristic of children with SEBD is that their social skills are not age appropriate (Frostad & Pijl, 2007). Another characteristic is that they experience challenges with initiating and maintaining relationships (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000). Specifically, their behaviours and problem-solving approaches tend to be inappropriate, manifested, for example, in physical and verbal aggression or withdrawal from difficult social situations (Gumpel & Sutherland, 2010; Kasari, Locke, Gulsrud, & Rotheram-Fuller, 2011; Kauffman & Landrum, 2012). These (inappropriate) social problem-solving approaches are known to have adverse impacts on the children's social participation within the classroom (Newcomb et al., 1993; Rose & Asher, 1999).

The consequences of a low or negative social participation within the school context on the overall development of children has been well documented (Bukowski, Motzoi, & Meyer, 2009; Ladd, Ettekal, & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2018; Rubin, Bukowski, & Laursen, 2011). Notwithstanding, feelings of social exclusion and a lack of friends in the classroom have been found to be predictive of

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internalising and externalising behavioural problems (Rubin et al., 2011). Conversely, having social relationships and friends in the classroom is reported to be a factor that protects against both social exclusion and victimisation due to bullying (Laursen, Bukowski, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007). Furthermore, the ownership of appropriate social skills has been demonstrated to be one of the enhancing conditions for developing positive relationships (Frostad & Pijl, 2007). A positive social participation is characterised by reciprocal friendships and acceptance within the classroom (Koster, Nakken, Pijl, & van Houten, 2009). In light of this definition, it can be posited that children with SEBD are at risk of experiencing problems relating to their social participation within the classroom (Koster et al., 2009) and other far-reaching consequences such as early school dropout, and negative social-emotional outcomes, such as depression and other mental health issues (e.g. Bierman, 2004; Rubin et al., 2011).

Since the introduction of the policy of the act “Befitting Education” in 2014, mainstream schools in the Netherlands are obliged to include and provide education to all learners, including children with mild and severe types of SEBD (Wet Passend Onderwijs, 2012). Part of this act is that schools apply a needs-based approach for defining special educational needs as opposed to a medical approach. In the Netherlands this act is also known as “Appropriate Education”. In this study the term SEBD is used to refer to children with different kinds of social-emotional challenges and behavioural problems, as identified by their teachers or through formal assessments (Wet Passend Onderwijs, 2012). For example: hyperactivity, aggressiveness, performance anxiety and extreme shyness. Note that in the Netherlands students with SEBD are not obligated to have a formal diagnosis of SEBD in order to be eligible for extra support relating to their social interactions, behaviour or emotional functioning at school (EPIC, 2019).

Over the past decades, the problems and consequences of challenges with social participation within the inclusive education setting were frequently studied (see for a recent example the special issue (Schwab, Nel, & Hellmich, 2018). However, most of this research is mainly conducted *on* children, rather than *with* children (Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2019). The rights of children to be heard and to participate in research are well entrenched in declarations such as the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC; Unicef, 1989), the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the Incheon Declaration: Education 2030 (UNESCO, 2015). Article 84 of the Incheon Declaration specifically states that children should be directly consulted in the process of developing education programmes for children (UNESCO, 2015). Not including *all* children means constraining their full participation within society, thereby undermining their rights to participate (Sargeant, 2018). Up to now, however, children’s participation within research has been sparse (Lundqvist, 2014) or limited to the role of being a consultant (Pearson, 2016; Sargeant, 2018).

To fully account for the needs of children and to change education in a meaningful way for the children themselves, children ought to be included in research and in the implementation and realization of inclusive education (Sargeant & Gillett-Swan, 2019; Sargeant, 2018). It has been acknowledged that if children are included in inclusive educational research, this could positively push the move towards inclusive education and benefit the social and educational needs of the children (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; Calder, Hill, & Pellicano, 2013; Lundqvist, 2014; Sargeant, 2018). The inclusion of the voices of children is not only right’s based, but a necessity in realizing an inclusive education system that meets the needs of children, with or without SEBD. The question is not *whether* the participation of young children should occur within educational research and educational reform, but rather *how* this can be accomplished. Accordingly, efforts should focus on *following up* on the insights thus acquired. In this paper, we discuss a study that we conducted to explore the preferences of young children with or at risk of SEBD, who experience challenges with their social participation in the classroom, concerning approaches they preferred in order to resolve social problems. The social problem situations addressed in the study are situations of social exclusion as well as victimisation due to bullying in the classroom context, as well as recess time. Our aim was to unfold which approaches are preferred by these children, in order to realize a more (child-oriented) needs based approach to facilitate the social participation of children with or at risk of SEBD, within the mainstream classroom. Thus, we aimed to answer the following research question: *Which approaches are preferred by young children with or at risk of SEBD for resolving social problems in situations of social exclusion and of victimisation?*

2. Method

2.1. Research design

To investigate young children’s preferences regarding approaches for resolving social problems, we chose an interview-based approach grounded in the principles of Q-methodology (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Q-methodology combines characteristics of both qualitative and quantitative methods for analysing subjective phenomena, like views, beliefs or, as in this study, preferences. Typically, participants are asked to rank a set of statements about a topic, and to explain the motivation behind their ranking during a follow-up interview. Assuming that respondents with the same view on the topic of study would rank the statements similarly, by person factor analysis is used to identify groups of respondents that ranked the statements similarly. A weighted ranking of the statements is computed for each group, which is then interpreted as a shared view on the topic. The qualitative materials obtained through the interviews are used to verify the interpretation of the quantitative findings and to deepen and enrich the interpretations of the views. Previous studies have established that Q studies are appropriate in research contexts that involve young children (Ellingsen, Thorsen, & Størksen, 2014; Kelly, 2007). The playful sorting procedure, which is part of a Q study, makes it easier for children to express their views and experiences (Ellingsen, Størksen, & Stephens, 2010; Ellingsen et al., 2014). In addition, the materials used in a Q study can be adapted for use among the study population, for example, by using images, short phrases or single words, thus enabling a more inclusive approach for participants who may require support in communicating their preferences (Ellingsen et al., 2014; Taylor, Delprato, & Knapp, 1994), such as the children in this study.

In a Q study, participants engage in a ranking exercise in which they order a set of statements within a grid and explain their ranking in a follow-up interview. These rankings are then analysed using by-person factor analysis to identify shared perspectives

(factors) based on similarities in rankings of the statements (Watts & Stenner, 2012). The rankings are interpreted and described based on the characterising and distinguishing statements entailed in each viewpoint and the corresponding qualitative material.

Prior to commencing the study, approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the University.

2.2. Participants

Forty-five children (28 boys and 17 girls) in grade 1 and 2 (age range of 6–8 years), attending 13 different elementary schools in the Netherlands, participated in the present study. There were 16 grade 1 children and 29 grade 2 children.

To recruit the participants, we selected a convenience sample of 200 school directors of regular elementary schools in the Netherlands. Children who met the following criteria could participate in this study: (1) children who received extra support for handling their social and emotional problems as well as their behavioural challenges in the classroom, and (2) children who were considered neglected or ignored, as they experienced low or negative acceptance levels in relation to their peers in the classroom, as indicated by the socio-metric data. To establish children's social positions within the classroom, socio-metric data on social networks in the classroom (i.e., sociogram, sociomatrix) was collected by teachers and were analysed by the researchers (in cooperation with the teachers) afterwards. Where such networks were not available, we collected socio-metric data using Sometics, a software programme available online.

Prior to selecting participants, we contacted the school directors to elicit their interest in participating in the study and to request them to provide their active consent for the use or collection of socio-metric data. Thirteen school directors agreed to participate and gave their consent for the use or collection of socio-metric data.

The parents or legal caregivers, of children who met the criteria for inclusion in the study, received an envelope via the school with a letter providing information about the study, an informed consent form and a questionnaire for obtaining background information about the child to be filled out by the parent. Forty-five parents gave their consent for their children's participation in the study. This low response may be attributed to the tendency of both teachers and parents to protect socially excluded children with or at risk of SEBD by withholding their consent (Falkmer, Granlund, Nilholm, & Falkmer, 2012).

2.3. Procedure

All interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis by a trained interviewer. The team of interviewers comprised two Master's students and an experienced student assistant (the third author). The interviews were held between April 2016 and May 2017 and varied in length between 15 and 40 min. To ensure that the children understood their right to decline to participate in the interviews, every interview began with an introduction regarding the aim of the study, and an explanation on rights to participate in research was provided to the children. All of the children gave their assent to participate and to have the interview audio taped. Every interview was carried out in a quiet room at the child's school. At the conclusion of the interview, each child received a small token of appreciation.

We made careful choices regarding both the wording and the material applied for the interviews. Our aim in doing so was to create an opportunity for the children to talk about and share their preferred approaches for resolving social problems in situations of social exclusion and victimisation due to bullying. We therefore used the backpack of 'Dora the Explorer' as a metaphor for explaining the purpose of the study (see Box 1).

The children conducted the sorting procedure twice; once for a social exclusion scenario and once for a victimisation scenario. These scenarios were introduced using supporting drawings (see Appendix A). These drawings were produced for a study on moral development for elementary school children (Jansma, Malti, Opendakker, & Van Der Werf, 2018). The scenarios and drawings reflected the gender of the child being interviewed.

Following the introduction of the scenario, each child was presented with 15 statement cards and the sorting grid. The grid was displayed on a magnetic whiteboard and contained a smiley symbol with the thumb down, representing the 'least preferred' approach on the outer left-hand side of the board, while a smiley with the thumb up was positioned at the outer right-hand side, representing the 'most preferred' approach (see Fig. 1).

As a first step, the children were asked to sort the 15 statements into three piles representing not preferred, neutral and preferred approaches for resolving a situation of social exclusion. After the first sorting had been completed, the children were invited to place the statements on the sorting grid, starting with the not-preferred pile, which they were asked to place in the least preferred slot on the far-left side of the grid. Subsequently, the children were invited to place the preferred statements and finally the neutral statements on the grid. They could reposition statements on the grid. Once the children had finished sorting and placing the statements, they were prompted to comment on their sorting, specifically on the two respective sets of most and least preferred statements. This provided additional insights into the specific context of the child's sorting, which were used in the interpretation of the results. Less

Box 1

Introduction.

We are doing this study because we want to create a backpack like that of Dora the Explorer for children who are being excluded to play along or are bullied in the classroom. We have a lot of solutions that we think should be [placed] in this backpack. But we don't know which of these solutions are preferred by young children, such as yourself. Will you help us?

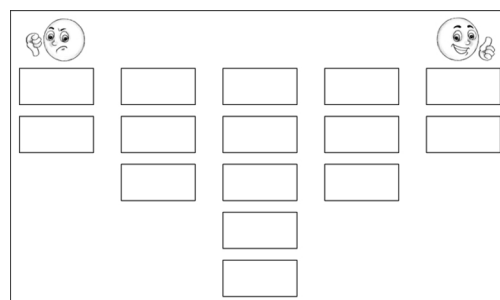


Fig. 1. A sorting grid.

than half of the children elaborated on their sorting. This procedure was then repeated for the victimisation scenario.

2.4. Measures

2.4.1. Statement cards

In the present study, participants ranked 15 statements representing approaches for resolving social problems. These statements were formulated by the authors, based on the interview-based study conducted by [de Leeuw, de Boer, and Minnaert \(2018\)](#). Hence, content validity of these statements is grounded from within the interviews [de Leeuw et al. \(2018\)](#). In the aforementioned study, children with SEBD attending grade 5 and 6 (aged 10–13 years) at special and regular elementary schools, who experienced challenges with their social participation, were interviewed about approaches for dealing with social problems that they themselves had applied. Thereby, these children identified their preferred approaches for resolving issues of social exclusion and victimisation.

The 15 statements represent approaches derived from the following five coping categories: problem-solving, seeking social support, withdrawing from the situation, externalising behaviour and internalising behaviour ([Causey & Dubow, 1992](#); [Green, Cillessen, Rechis, Patterson, & Hughes, 2008](#); [Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003](#)). Examples of these statements included: ‘The teacher punishes the classmates who exclude or bully by denying them recess and making them write rules’ (statement #2), ‘My classmates stand up for me when I am bullied’ (statement #6, formulated for victimisation), ‘When I am excluded, other classmates stand up for me’ (statement #6, formulated for social exclusion) and ‘I will play alone’ (statement #15). Each statement was printed on a card, together with a visual image (see Appendix B for examples), and a magnet was attached at the back, enabling the children to easily sort and replace the statements. The statements were written in Dutch.

2.5. Data analysis

By-person factor analysis was conducted using the PQ software programme (version 2.35: [Schmolck & Atkinson, 2002](#)). The analytical procedure was conducted separately for the respective datasets on social exclusion and victimisation. Centroid factor analysis was subsequently conducted, followed by varimax rotation, which was applied to identify clusters of participants who ranked the statements in a similar manner. We selected the number of factors per dataset based on an examination of the statistical outputs. The factor solution was expected to provide a comprehensive picture of the data, with a coherent interpretation of each factor, which was required to have at least three defining and unique participants to validate the established pattern within the factor ([Cutillo, 2018](#); [Thurstone, 1947](#)).

An average ranking of the statements was computed for each factor, along with the factor loadings of children that defined the factor as weights to enable a description and interpretation of the factors. Furthermore, the characterising statements, placed in the outer columns of this ranking, and distinguishing statements, with significantly different positions ($p < .05$) in the ranking compared with other factors, were also used to interpret the factors ([Watts & Stenner, 2012](#)). The children’s explanations of their rankings associated with a factor were used to check and finalise the interpretation. To illustrate the factor interpretations, quotations from the interview materials were extracted and used in the descriptions.

3. Results

Four-factor solutions were found to be the most comprehensive and coherent outcomes for the 45 rankings obtained for both situations of social exclusion and victimisation. [Table 1](#) presents the weighted average rankings of the statements for each factor. [Table 2](#) provides interpretations of the factors. In the factor’s narrative, the position of the statement within the factor is indicated as follows: when statement 7 is the most preferred approach, this is presented as #7: +2. The rankings of the statements ranged from -2 to +2.

3.1. Factors relating to social exclusion

There were no consensus statements on the four established factors relating to the social exclusion rankings. The sorting of one

Table 1

Ranking of statements for each factor in situations entailing social exclusion and victimization.

Statement (To resolve the situation, I prefer that...)	Social exclusion				Victimisation			
	F1	F2	F3	F4	F1	F2	F3	F4
1 The teacher calls the parent of the child who is excluding or victimising others	1	-2	1	-1	0	-1	1	2*
2 The teacher gives a punishment	0	-2*	-1	0	-2*	-1*	0	0
3 The teacher encourage that everybody is accepted	0	0	0	2*	0	2*	0	-1
4 The teacher keeps an eye on the excluded/victimised child	1	-1*	1	1	-1	0	2*	1*
5 Inclusion is talked about in the classroom	0*	-1	-1	1*	0	1	1	-1*
6 My peers stand up for me	2	1	2	2	0	2*	0	0
7 My peers invite me to join another game	1	2	0	0	1	0	-1	1
8 Exclusion/victimisation is resolved verbally	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
9 I walk away	-1	1*	-1	-1	2*	-2*	1*	-1
10 I ignore this	0	0	0	-1*	-1	0	0	2*
11 I get angry and act out by shouting, kicking and hitting	-2	-1*	-2	-2	-2	-2	-2	-2
12 I say, "Stop, don't do it!"	-1	0	2	1	2	1	-1*	0*
13 I join another game	2	2	0	0	0	0	-1*	1
14 I get revenge	-1	1*	-2	-2	-1	-1	-2	-2
15 I play alone	-2*	0	1*	0	1	0	2	0
Eigenvalue	9.0	4.1	6.8	8.6	7.2	8.6	4.1	7.2
Explanation study variance	20%	9%	15%	19%	16%	19%	9%	16%

child (ID 203017) for all of the perspectives was negative but not significant. This child, along with 12 other children, did not associate significantly with any one particular perspective. The factor loadings of children who did load significantly for one factor ranged from .522 to .834. The total variance of the four-factor solution for situations of social exclusion explained 63%.

3.1.1. Social exclusion factor 1

In general, the shared perspective of the children defining this factor have a preference for seeking or obtaining the support of others to resolve situations of social exclusion. The distinguishing statements for this factor revealed a lack of preference for playing alone (#15: -2) among these children and some level of indifference to talking about inclusion in the classroom (everybody belongs; #5: 0) for resolving social exclusion.

The children defining this factor commonly preferred the following approaches for resolving social exclusion: their peers standing up for them when they are socially excluded (#6: +2), joining another game on their own initiative (#13: +2) or being invited to do so by their peers (#7: +1). One child made the following comment regarding the latter strategy: 'Children who exclude don't say that, they say "why don't you just go and play somewhere else?" Then I will play another game and when others join, I don't exclude someone myself. I say, "it's okay, you can join too" [to the child who excluded me]'.

The preferred approach for these children was for their teachers to call the parents of the children who were excluding other children (#1: +1) or to keep an eye out for them (#4: +1). This finding is in agreement with approaches that were ranked lowest by children who defined this factor, indicating a discomfort with standing up for themselves (#12: -1), for example, by acting out (#11: -2). One child made the following comment relating to not acting out and getting angry: 'I get angry sometimes [when excluded], but I do not respond to them by kicking or shouting. Only later when I am at home, I get a little bit angry, but I never say that'.

3.1.2. Social exclusion factor 2

Similar to the first factor, children who defined this factor shared the perspective that their peers should stand up for them (#6: +1) or invite them to join their games (#7: +2). In contrast to the perspective associated with the first factor, the consensus was that the responsibility for resolving the situation is not only that of others.

The children also stated a preference for being the responsible actors, for example, joining in other children's games on their own (#13: +2) or walking away from the situation (#9: +1). A distinguishing feature of this factor was a more positive attitude among the children towards obtaining revenge on the peers who had excluded them (#14: +1). However, they preferred to do so without getting angry and acting out by shouting, kicking, and hitting (#11: -1). One child commented on this strategy of getting revenge as follows: 'Sometimes they say to me, "you are weak, you have no guts". Then I respond by saying "I'll show you what I've got"'. In addition, children who defined this factor shared a dislike for the role for the teacher. They dislike it when the teacher called the parents of the children who had excluded them (#1: -2), punished these children by denying them recess (#2: -2) or kept an eye on the excluded children (#4: -1).

3.1.3. Social exclusion factor 3

In general, the shared perspective of the children who defined the third factor of social exclusion highlighted the diversity of the responsible actors, especially in comparison to other social exclusion factors. The preferences of children who defined this factor were as follows: their peers standing up for them (#6: +2), the teacher's intervention through calling the parents (#1: +1) and keeping an eye on the child experiencing social exclusion (#4: +1) or the child standing up for himself or herself to stop the social exclusion (#12: +2).

Table 2

Background information on participants and factor associations.

ID	Gender	Age	Grade	Social exclusion				Victimisation			
				F1 n = 14	F2 n = 3	F3 n = 6	F4 n = 10	F1 n = 10	F2 n = 12	F3 n = 3	F4 n = 11
203001	Boy	7	1	.546	-.449	.027	.078	-.116	-.197	.148	.694
203102	Girl	6	1	.345	-.091	-.319	.675	-.115	.601	.063	.596
203003	Boy	7	1	.283	.049	.502	.294	.085	.037	.195	.809
203004	Boy	6	1	.207	-.258	.577	-.161	.556	.232	.126	.086
203005	Boy	6	1	.487	.193	.320	.580	.760	.261	.168	-.182
203006	Boy	6	1	.705	-.040	.287	.158	.390	.716	.275	-.021
203007	Boy	7	1	.198	.344	.473	.559	.623	.315	.241	.104
203008	Boy	7	1	-.012	.042	.522	.327	.183	.197	.613	-.209
204109	Girl	8	2	.345	-.182	.594	.360	.441	.603	.247	.309
204110	Girl	8	2	.181	-.070	.505	.133	.067	.107	.755	.250
204111	Girl	8	2	.651	.156	.170	.101	.142	.767	.174	.012
204012	Boy	8	2	.589	.171	.382	.157	-.004	.553	-.166	.030
203013	Boy	7	1	.538	.060	.420	.133	.668	-.133	.158	.328
203014	Boy	7	1	.147	.245	.323	.523	.515	.295	-.023	.464
203015	Boy	6	1	.310	-.038	.321	.724	.602	.497	.133	-.058
203016	Boy	7	1	.335	-.102	.539	.613	.091	.216	-.108	.791
203,017	Boy	7	1	-.127	-.037	-.346	-.497	-.409	.070	-.622	-.168
203118	Girl	6	1	.379	.193	.341	.271	.455	.296	.091	.627
203021	Boy	6	1	.670	-.911	.495	.347	.347	.625	-.096	.553
203119	Girl	6	1	.065	.802	.289	-.026	.752	-.035	.082	.250
204120	Girl	7	2	.579	.354	.120	.614	.302	-.124	.384	.572
304013	Boy	8	2	.448	.175	.074	.754	.291	.711	.125	.188
304114	Girl	7	2	.232	-.055	.796	.283	.546	.367	-.059	.454
304115	Girl	7	2	.573	-.265	-.397	-.120	.120	.110	-.135	.588
304016	Boy	8	2	.560	-.326	.178	.618	.421	.627	.001	.323
304017	Boy	8	2	.739	-.107	.045	.423	.627	.195	.165	.343
304118	Girl	7	2	.833	.440	.059	.245	.116	.785	-.146	.166
304019	Boy	8	2	.653	-.174	.151	.123	.490	.087	.378	.140
304020	Boy	7	2	.243	-.263	.205	.684	.574	.168	.507	.136
304121	Girl	8	2	-.001	.089	.716	.087	.257	.135	-.089	.704
304022	Boy	7	2	.128	.421	.375	.419	.670	.251	.093	.088
304123	Girl	7	2	-.023	-.168	.052	.768	.035	.828	.116	-.071
304024	Boy	7	2	.112	.729	-.222	.285	.438	.246	-.413	-.289
304025	Boy	8	2	.644	-.589	.108	.172	-.164	.591	-.004	.675
304026	Boy	7	2	-.097	-.147	.506	.556	.028	.766	.117	.176
304127	Girl	8	2	.578	-.111	.183	.478	.225	.739	.312	.238
304128	Girl	7	2	.834	.078	.097	.185	.108	.372	.299	.618
304029	Boy	7	2	-.004	.212	-.058	.621	.289	.279	.067	.446
304130	Girl	7	2	.586	-.162	.596	.305	.409	.571	.129	.067
304031	Boy	7	2	.504	.263	.340	.676	.240	.730	.519	.076
304132	Girl	7	2	.256	-.255	.247	.737	-.021	.233	.355	.214
304033	Boy	8	2	.608	-.552	.107	-.066	-.047	.053	.512	.582
304034	Boy	8	2	-.066	.639	-.218	-.354	-.220	-.099	-.476	.108
304035	Boy	8	2	-.046	.533	.574	-.381	.530	-.388	-.114	-.061
304133	Girl	8	2	.175	.060	.624	-.000	.224	.025	.329	.675

Bold represents statistically significant associations.

Typically, children who defined this factor disliked acting out (#11: -2) and attempts to get revenge on their peers who had excluded them (#14: -2). After experiencing a situation in which they had been excluded, these children did not mind playing alone (#15: +1). One child commented on this preference as follows: 'I like playing alone because then I can quieten down, and I don't have to be considerate towards others'.

3.1.4. Social exclusion factor 4

Overall, the children who defined the fourth factor of social exclusion held that responsibility for social inclusion lies in the classroom approaches as a whole, with the onus of responsibility lying with the teacher.

These children felt that the teacher should encourage the inclusion of all children (#3; +2) and that peers should stand up for each other (#6: +2). One child made the following comment regarding these strategies: 'The teacher can say something like "will you stop this and play a nice game together?", and then that's what they all should do'. These children shared the perspective that ignoring the situation (#10: -1) would not resolve the situation. Complementing this view was another shared perspective that social inclusion should be talked about in the classroom (#5: +1). The children relied most on their teachers to resolve situations of social exclusion and to stimulate positive interactions within the classroom.

3.2. Factors relating to victimisation

Among the children's rankings of statements relating to victimisation, statement #8 (victimisation is resolved through words) and #11 (acting out) constituted consensus statements. This means that no pairs of shared perspectives were distinguished for these statements, with #11 considered significant ($p > .05$). In addition, this statement on acting out (#11) and the statement on getting revenge on a bully (#14) were ranked lowest by all of the children. In this four-factor solution, 12 children did not associate significantly with one particular perspective. They differed from the children in the social exclusion rankings who did not identify with a shared perspective. Factor loadings of children that were significant ranged from .530 to .828. The total variance of the four-factor solution for situations of victimisation explained 50%.

3.2.1. Victimisation factor 1

Overall, the children defining this factor share the perspective that they are the main responsible actors who could resolve a situation of victimisation without fighting or involving the teacher in punishing the bullies. The preference of these children was to resolve situations of victimisation by distancing themselves from them. For example, they would walk away (#9: +2) or play alone (#15: +1), but they would not ignore the situation (#10: -1). These children would not act out (#11: -2), but they would tell the children who were bullying them to stop (#12: +2). For example, one child stated: 'I think I use this strategy [tell the bully to stop] once a week. When I do that, the bullies approach the teacher and when I also get there, I can explain that I tell the truth. This usually works really well'.

The children who defined this factor ranked the statement in which the teacher was the responsible actor, that is, the teacher punishes the bullies (#2: -2) and the teacher should keep an eye out for them (#4: -1), lowest in comparison to rankings assigned for other statements. A preferred approach for these children was dealing with the victimisation in a way that would feel good for them.

3.2.2. Victimisation factor 2

The overall preference of the children who defined this factor was for resolution of the victimisation in which all concerned would take responsibility for the situation. Thus, an outcome in which everyone would play nicely together again was considered desirable.

The distinguishing features of this victimisation factor are that peers should stand up for them (#6: +2) and that the teacher should attempt to ensure that everybody is accepted and not victimised (#3: +2). These children also preferred approaches entailing the use of words to resolve the victimisation situation (#8: +1), talking about the importance of social inclusion with the whole classroom (#5: +1) and telling the bully to stop (#12: +1). For example, one of the children who defined this factor made the following comment after the sorting exercise: 'I like that solution [peers standing up for them #6] because then you just feel like you belong'.

The children who defined the second victimisation factor were not in favour of the following approaches: walking away from the situation (#9: -2), acting out in relation to the bully (#14: -2), punishing the bullies either by calling their parents (#1: -1) or denying them recess and making them write out rules (#2: -1) to resolve situations of victimization.

3.2.3. Victimisation factor 3

The overall preference of the children defining the third victimisation factor was for non-confrontational social problem-solving approaches to resolve victimisation and the creation of a safe personal space.

The children who defined this factor indicated a preference for playing alone (#15: +2) and for walking away from the situation (#9: +1). A shared perspective relating to the resolution of situations of victimisation due to bullying that was associated with the preference for playing alone was a dislike of invitations by their peers to join in a game (#7: -1) or of joining a game with others on their own (#13: -1). They were not in favour of getting revenge (#14: -2) and would not act out by shouting, kicking or hitting (#11: -2) in relation to the bully. These children indicated that their teacher keeping an eye out for them (#4: +2) was a preferred approach. The following response illustrates the shared perspective of the children defining this factor: 'I always go directly to the teacher, when something goes wrong outside'.

3.2.4. Victimisation factor 4

The children who defined the fourth factor shared an overall perspective of seeing their teachers as safeguards, as independent efforts to deal with the victimisation situation were not always sufficient. Contrasting with the third victimisation factor, the children defining this factor expressed a preference for being with peers (#7: +1). One child commented on the preference for joining another game on their own initiative (#13: +1) as follows: 'It feels better to play with someone who you think is nice'.

The children defining this factor ranked the approach of ignoring the situation (#10: +2) the highest compared with the other victimisation factors. Notwithstanding their own ignoring of the situation, the children who defined this factor shared the perspective that the teacher should punish the bullies by calling their parents (#1: +2) and should keep an eye on the victimised child (#4: +1). One child explained this as follows: 'I like this one [teacher keeps an eye out on the victimised child #4] because if someone does something, I hope [that] the teacher [will] pay attention and say something about it, so the bullies know that they are not allowed to do that anymore'.

4. Discussion

The present study was aimed at answering the research question on which approaches are preferred by young children for resolving situations of social exclusion and victimisation. We listened directly to the narratives of 45 children (within an age range of 6–8 years) with or at risk of SEBD, thus respecting the right of children to participate in research (UNESCO, 2015). Whereas this specific target group experiences challenges with their social participation within the mainstream classroom (Adderley et al., 2015; Henke et al., 2017). Using a Q methodological approach (Watts & Stenner, 2012), we could explore the preferences from a child perspective. The participating children were requested to rank a range of problem-solving approaches, encompassing approaches that are also less socially preferred (e.g., getting revenge and acting out). Our study unfolded the viewpoints of different groups of children based on their rankings of 15 approaches for resolving situations of both social exclusion and victimisation.

For situations of both social exclusion and victimisation, a four-factor solution was chosen as it was deemed the most comprehensive and coherent solution. The factors represented the different viewpoints of the children based on their shared perspectives on approaches for resolving situations of social exclusion or victimisation. The factors were mostly distinguished according to which actor was held responsible for resolving the situation, with the actors ranging from the children themselves (partly for social exclusion factor 2 and victimisation factor 1), their peers (social exclusion factor 1 and partly for social exclusion factor 2), the teacher (social exclusion factor 4 and victimisation factors 3 and 4) and responsibility collectively assigned to all three actors (social exclusion factor 3 and victimisation factor 2). Interestingly, most children had a different preferred approach regarding the two situations. Although there was some overlap in the preferred social problem-solving approaches for the two situations, there were also notable differences.

The differences in the profiles within and between the situations highlight the importance of examining the preferences of each child and situation. This point is in line with the recommendations of de Leeuw et al. (2018). These authors, who conducted an interview-based study with children with SEBD in grade 5 and 6, found that it was not possible to formulate a one-size-fits-all approach for resolving either social exclusion or situations of victimisation due to bullying. The needs and preferred approaches of individual children and situations are likely to vary significantly. Children could prefer different approaches, but due to circumstances apply approaches that they like less (de Leeuw et al., 2018). Future research, including longitudinal studies of preferences and applied strategies are expected to reveal differences attributed to the situational context of the social problem and to the child-related context (Green et al., 2008). Whereas children learn how to cope with social exclusion and social problems through experience, we expect that a comparison of the profiles of children across different age groups would not be possible (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001; Skinner et al., 2003).

Although our specific interest lay in the preferences of children with or at risk of SEBD, the profiles covered in the present study did not include details on the types of SEBD. One explanation for these results could be given that early diagnosis of SEBD is unusual, whereas the behavioural challenges are not that distinguishable (Landrum, Tankersley, & Kauffman, 2003). Notwithstanding in line with the international move towards inclusive education, the Dutch system has prevailed labelling (young) children with medical diagnoses has changed towards a system of labelling based on the needs of a child (Wet Passend Onderwijs, 2012). Another explanation could be the heterogeneity of population characteristics, even within the different types of SEBD (Martel, Goth-Owens, Martinez-Torteya, & Nigg, 2010). We acknowledge that given the heterogeneity of population characteristics, other profiles or preferences exist that are not based on SEBD types (Cooper, Kakos, & Jacobs, 2013; Thompson & Morris, 2016). The question could be asked as to whether the behavioural challenges of the participants in our study constituted the main reason for their experience of problems of social exclusion within mainstream classroom (Frostad & Pijl, 2007). We therefore recommend that future studies incorporate the perspectives and applied social problem-solving approaches of children with or at risk of SEBD who are socially included. A comparison of the applied social problem-solving approaches of included and excluded children would enable the identification of the positive and negative effects of specific approaches (Newcomb et al., 1993; Rose & Asher, 1999). Furthermore, all children who are socially excluded should have the opportunity to participate in research that explores preferences relating to approaches for resolving situations of social exclusion and victimisation due to bullying (Sargeant, 2018; UNESCO, 2015).

4.1. Limitations of the study

Our study demonstrates that a Q methodological approach can add value to efforts in exploring the perceptions of young children, even when addressing sensitive topics such as social exclusion and victimisation due to bullying. As a result of the adoption of a playful ranking procedure of the statements, children were not required to memorise all of the possible problem-solving approaches. However, an important aspect of a Q methodological study is the elaboration on the rankings (Watts & Stenner, 2012). A limitation within our study is that only half of the children elaborated on their rankings. This finding might be related to the fact that for (young) children, it can be quite difficult to reflect on and verbalize their own thinking and decision-making processes (Kuhn, 2000). Furthermore, children are commonly not used to express their opinions freely, so they might have felt insecure in communicating their views directly in an adult organized school context (Punch, 2002). Lastly, given the duration of the interviews, the relatively large number of children that did not elaborate on their ranking preferences might be related to a decline in motivation or attention span. A few participants indicated that the procedure of sorting the statements twice (once for each situation) was quite intensive and long. They would have preferred to conduct the second sorting at a different time.

4.2. Implications and future research

In line with previously conducted Q studies (Ellingsen et al., 2014), the children in this study indicated that the sorting of statements was a useful exercise for learning about different approaches for addressing social problems and that they appreciated being able to share their perceptions on this topic with an adult. In future studies, researchers could enhance this feeling of participation among the children even further than was realized in the our study. For example, while the set of approaches in our study were based on interviews with children addressing approaches of social exclusion and victimization (de Leeuw et al., 2018), the 15 statements were, however, worded by adults. It is therefore possible that the statements, that were formulated, were too generic or did not fit the wording that children would use. For example, a few participants experienced difficulties with the nuances between strategies. In addition, children could have been asked whether an approach for resolving social problems was missing from the statement set, or afterwards, whether they identified themselves with the Q profile to which they were related in the analysis. We recommend that researchers working with (young) children should actively include the participation of children in more stages of a Q study. Discussions with children could be held about the formulation of the statements that will be used in a Q study. Moreover, children's participation could be enlarged by co-creating the final formulation of the profiles. Accordingly, the wording of profile descriptions would be more closely aligned with the perspectives of the young participants. Consequently, children have the space to participate more actively in the research process (Mason & Hood, 2011), thereby ensuring complete adherence of child participation rights to conventions such as the Incheon Declaration: Education 2030 (UNESCO, 2015).

Insights acquired from the perspectives of children are of value in bridging the gap between and progressing towards the realization of inclusive education that really meets the needs of children (Messiou, 2006; Pearson, 2016). These insights are not only relevant and applicable for research, but should also be applied within the (inclusive) classroom. We would therefore advice teachers to apply the ranking of the statements in their classroom, in order to explore the needs of the children within their classroom. The purposes for the ranking can vary substantially. For example, at an individual level, the sorting of statements can be used to explore the preferences of a specific child to determine which approaches a child prefers. The teacher can then choose an intervention that best meets the child's preferences and needs. There are social interventions that are focused on improving social inclusion through the efforts of the entire class or through strengthening the child's own resilience when victimized. At a classroom level, the sorting of the statements can be used as a learning tool for the entire class to discuss and reflect upon differences in approaches for resolving social exclusion. This method of discussing different opinions, can be efficaciously embedded within classroom dialogues (Lloyd, Kolodziej, & Brashears, 2016).

5. Conclusion

Although the findings of our study indicated that there are meaningful shared perspectives among a heterogeneous group of young children for resolving diverse situations of social exclusion, we do not recommend a one-size-fits-all approach derived from these shared perspectives. Considering these heterogeneous perspectives and actively involving children as well as teachers and researchers could lead to more successful outcomes relating to the achievement of social participation within classrooms. This approach would create possibilities for developing tailored, need-based interventions and educational changes that are needed in the move towards inclusive education.

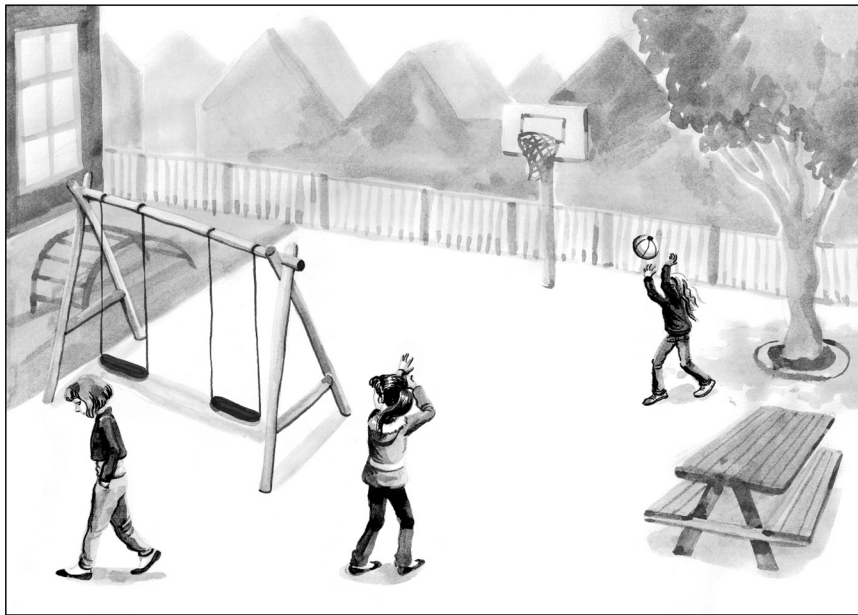
In sum, this study demonstrates how the Q methodology can be used as a child-friendly approach to explore the perspectives of young children. The findings of our study highlight the diversity of the participants' preferred approaches, emphasising the importance of a need-based approach to facilitating social participation. Notwithstanding, underline the importance of including young children's perspectives when addressing their social participation. Through the inclusion of children's perspectives alongside those of teachers and practitioners, an education setting can be realized that is inclusive and equitable, as stipulated in the Incheon Declaration: Education 2030 and the fourth sustainable development goal (UNESCO, 2015).

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Appendix A

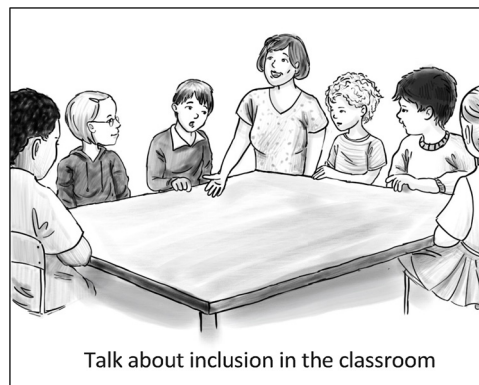
An example of a hypothetical scenario of social exclusion for girls.



Drawing by Emma Wilson (artist), sourced from a study by [Jansma et al. \(2018\)](#) on moral development.

Appendix B

Examples of statement cards.



Drawings by Sylwia Regulska (artist).

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